Can Literalists and Non-literalists Study Bible Together?

Precis: In 2006, Andrew Village urged congregational leaders to teach in such a way as “to allow both literalists and non-literalists to coexist.” Despite ongoing “culture wars” in the US and other Anglophone nations, progressive Pentecostal, Adventist, and Evangelical scholars all argue that this kind of teaching is possible. This poster draws on the work of Village, Jack Levison, and Andrew Rogers, on my own recent work in Bible pedagogy and Pragmatist hermeneutics, and on conversations with Practical Theologians, to propose concrete methods that can bridge the putative literalism divide.

What is your topic?
Christian pedagogical practices relating to Scripture

What is your research question and methodology?
What practices can teachers use to keep Christian congregants – some whose initial commitments are “literalist,” and some whose are “non-literalist” – in the same group and studying Scripture together?
(1) Based on a review of empirical and theological studies, my poster maps the complex “literalist” / “non-literalist” divides across a number of representative groupings: Evangelicals, Pentecostal / charismatics, Roman Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Christians with higher and lower rates of education. It focuses on Anglophone Christians in the US and UK.
(2) Based on pedagogical conversations with practical theologians and theological educators, my poster will list several contextualized, concrete suggestions for keeping literalist and non-literalist learners studying Scripture together.

What theories inform your research? What are your core references?
My research is rooted in Classical Pragmatist hermeneutics, empirical theology, and practical theology.
Andrew Rogers. Congregational Hermeneutics: How Do We Read? Ashgate, 2016.

How is this research innovating the field of religious education?
While many theological and religious educators have proposed rationales and programs for overcoming Biblical literalism and historical-critical naiveté, few have thematized the value of literalist and non-literalist Christians living together in harmony (Ps 133:1). Fewer have outlined the practices necessary for this kind of learning community to exist. I want to push this conversation forward.

What is the status of the research?
My own recent publications have touched on the issue of teaching Bible in “mixed” settings, on Contextual Bible Study, and on Pragmatist or creative hermeneutics. I have presented my findings as a “Work in Progress” paper at the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology July 2016 annual meeting. I am incorporating the responses I received there from two
fellow educators who have been teaching Biblical Hermeneutics in mixed literalist-nonliteralist
groups.